



# Valeria Luiselli

BY JESSICA TEISCH

In a sharp critique of America's immigration system, Valeria Luiselli's new novel *Lost Children Archive* (reviewed on page 25) follows a family on a road trip from New York City to Arizona, where their dual purpose is to understand the remnants of Apache culture, as well as to locate two Mexican girls last seen at a detention center. But, with their imaginations in full force, they verge on their own personal crises.

*Lost Children Archive* extends, from a fictional perspective, the true story Luiselli relates in *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017), a record of her work as a translator for Latin American children attempting to enter the United States. Both books—bookends—depart from her previous works, what the *New York Times* describes as two “cheerfully wayward novels” and an essay collection sprung from an unusually fertile, erudite mind. Each of Luiselli's books—better thought of as a nontraditional, multilayered project—is its own experiment: the crowdsourcing collaboration and serial format of the novel *The Story of My Teeth* (2015), the layering of identity, place, geography, urban planning, and language in the essays in *Sidewalks* (2014). *Lost Children Archive* is no less innovative in its literary, photographic,

musical, and geographic mergings. “[T]he story of the migrant, she believes, insists upon a new form: How else to tell a story that has no end?” (*New York Times*). In all her work, Luiselli invites us to look across perspectives, generations, and geographies, and through multiple locations, dislocations, and relocations.

Born in Mexico City in 1983 to an Italian family, Luiselli spent a nomadic childhood in the United States, Costa Rica, Korea, and South Africa, where her father was the Mexican ambassador to the new democracy. She returned to Mexico City in her teens. “I had learned how to be a foreigner,” she told *Publishers Weekly*, “but I didn't know how to be a Mexican.” She then traveled alone to India, where she finished high school, and then studied in Mexico, Spain, and France. After earning her bachelor's degree in philosophy from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, Luiselli moved to New York City to intern with the United Nations; she then earned her PhD in Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Currently a professor of Romance Language and Literature at Hofstra University, she lives in Harlem with her husband, Mexican novelist

Álvaro Enrigue (*Sudden Death* ★★★ July/Aug 2016), and their children.

Given her peripatetic childhood, themes of absence and loss, dislocation and national identity, and language and mistranslations pervade both her fiction and nonfiction. “I have always been either a newcomer or someone who is about to leave, so that intermediate, almost ghostly position has always defined both my relationships to people and space,” she told *The Rumpus*. “... But I can always, quite easily, put myself in other people’s shoes, so to speak, and look at the world through them. I think that perpetual foreigners, such as myself, have that ability. They can erase themselves easily and look at the world quietly, slowly, without feeling compelled to take part in it. They do not act as protagonists, but as recorders of others’ lives.”

And in the works below, she records those multiple, and very often fractured, lives.

## Sidewalks

Essays (2014)

Translated from the Spanish by Christina MacSweeney

This slim collection of essays explores identity, place, geography, architecture, urban planning, and language. Though the book was published in tandem with her debut novel, *Faces in the Crowd*, in the United States, Luiselli started writing *Sidewalks* when she was 21 and living in Madrid. She told *The Rumpus* that the collection “is a kind of bibliographic autobiography, as much as it is a venture into urbanism from the viewpoint of literature.

It’s a coming-of-age essay, full of vitality and innocence, which deals with our relationship to spaces, books, and languages, among other things.” Neither singularly memoir, travel writing, nor literary criticism, *Sidewalks* is, instead, a wandering of sorts through Mexico City, New York, and Venice by a stranger (often on a bicycle) who always finds herself in a strange land.

The book starts and ends in Venice’s San Michele cemetery. In the first essay, Luiselli searches for the grave of nomadic poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky, wondering why it matters to her. From there, she looks at old maps of Mexico City and asks questions about urban planning; writes of books and authors, which she likens to “rewriting ourselves”; explores the modern flâneur; and dissects language and its uneasy translations (such as the Spanish concept of *relingos*, or empty urban spaces). Her search for a direct translation for the Portuguese “*saudade*” leads to an inquiry into melancholy and nostalgia, about which she writes that “there are things that produce nostalgia in advance.” The final essay comes full circle as Luiselli returns to Venice, envisioning her own tombstone. “[Luiselli’s] subtexts become almost a guide—aside we might hear from the city itself, whispering to us as we walk or bicycle through it, speak-



ing of its secrets,” wrote the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. “So it is with the best travel books and memoirs, those that go beyond simply recounting a journey. They allow the reader to wander with the writer; to tap into her voice and imagination.”

## Faces in the Crowd (2011; 2014)

Translated from the Spanish by Christina MacSweeney

Luiselli started *Faces in the Crowd*, which landed her on the National Book Award’s Five Under 35 list, when she moved to New York, just prior to the 2008 economic crisis. Though more mournful and complex than *Sidewalks*, *Faces in the Crowd* is, in many ways, a fictional relation to that work. “One of the biggest challenges at the formal level was to show in the language and syntax that these characters were somehow disintegrating,” Luiselli told *Publishers Weekly*. “There’s not a word for it in English, but in Spanish the word is ‘*afantasmarse*,’ which means ‘to become ghostly.’ For that to happen, I had to break the language up—to transform the characters into just voices and utterances at the end.”

Through the process of writing of a novel, a young, unhappily married mother and translator living in present-day Mexico City reflects on her obsession with Mexican poet Gilberto Owen, who lived in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance, on the opposite side of Morningside Park from García Lorca. Looking back to her younger self, she records how she saw his ghost on the New York subway, and her life started to mirror his own. Then the dying Owen’s voice enters the narrative. The narrator’s husband also intrudes, reading the book we’re reading and pointing out the factual inconsistencies. The plot, if there is one, is the narrator’s efforts to have her small publishing house release an edition of Owen’s poetry. But beneath, the novel speaks to the disappearances, the mirrored lives, the transient nature of reality, and literature’s ability to surpass time and space. “Ms. Luiselli’s conjuring act is to deftly blend the narrator’s real and invented accounts and blur any distinctions between them,” commented the *Wall Street Journal*. “... If Ms. Luiselli’s interest in the novelistic ambiguities of reality and temporality is not original—she is in debt to the great South American artificers Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar—the multilayered book she has devised brings freshness and excitement to such complex inquiries.”



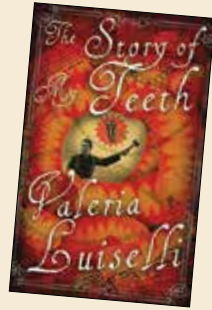
## The Story of My Teeth (2013; 2015)

Translated from the Spanish by Christina MacSweeney

♦ LOS ANGELES TIMES PRIZE FOR BEST FICTION

♦ AZUL PRIZE (CANADA)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD FINALIST



*The Story of My Teeth* marks a departure from Luiselli's previous two books. This highly inventive work was initially commissioned for the catalog of an exhibition at Galería Jumex, a contemporary art museum in Mexico City funded by the juice corporation Jumex. Luiselli decided to collaborate with the Jumex factory workers by sending them installments of the novel, which workers then read and discussed. Each meeting was recorded, and the recording was sent to Luiselli in New York before she wrote a new section. The author incorporated the workers' reactions, as well as their own stories, into the narrative. "While writing this novel I had to both entertain tired factory workers after their long day's work, and be able to extract from them enough material to write the next installment," Luiselli told *The Rumpus*. "It was the most difficult thing I've ever done. It was like being a clown and a psychologist at the same time, which was humbling."

In her four-part postmodern romp, the charming Gustavo "Highway" Sánchez is a collector and legendary auctioneer in Mexico City. "This," he announces, "is the story of my teeth, and my treatise on collectibles and the variable value of objects." He auctions off his old, rather unsightly teeth, claiming they once belonged to the mouths of Plato, Montaigne, Virginia Woolf, Borges, and other historical figures. He then purchases a set reputedly belonging to Marilyn Monroe and implants them in his own mouth. His son knocks him over and steals them, and another character (perhaps the narrator?) enters the story, but that's beside the point. In this surreal tale, peppered with philosophy and philology, the power of telling stories about the ordinary—and the extraordinary—shine through. "We have here before us today pieces of great value, since each contains a story replete with small lessons," Highway tells a group of auction attendees. The last 40 pages, written by Luiselli's translator, offer a wonderful surprise. "*The Story of My Teeth* is a playful, philosophical funhouse of a read that demonstrates that not only isn't experimental fiction dead, it needn't be deadly, either," wrote NPR. "Luiselli's elastic mind comfortably stretches to wrap itself around molars, Montaigne, fortune cookies and various theories of meaning."

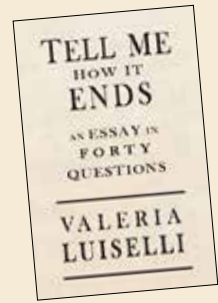
## Tell Me How It Ends

An Essay in 40 Questions (2017)

♦ AMERICAN BOOK AWARD

While she was waiting for her green card and living in New York, Luiselli set off on a road trip with her husband and their two children to Arizona. While driving, they heard news of the border crisis—80,000 unaccompanied children arriving at the border. Less than a year later, between 2014 and 2015, Luiselli volunteered as a translator for a New York immigration court, where she delivered a 40-question survey to dozens of unaccompanied and undocumented minors, ages six through teens, who had crossed Mexico from Central America. Most had come alone; many had been caught at the border. In *Tell Me How It Ends*, the whimsical literary sensibility of her past works disappears. Instead, in this personal critique of and inquiry into our immigration system, structured as a series of responses to the questionnaire, Luiselli confronts daily reality for so many youth. "For all its nuts-and-bolts look at the immigration process, what makes *Tell Me How It Ends* so moving and humane is that Luiselli doesn't serve up a catalogue of horror stories that soon grows numbing," wrote NPR. "In a touch that personalizes the migrant story, she deftly links the experiences of migrant children with her own efforts to get a green card and make a life here with her family."

Luiselli first asks the children, "Why did you come to the United States?"—a question that often dictates whether or not a child will become a U.S. citizen. "The problem with trying to tell their story," Luiselli writes, "is that it has no beginning, no middle and no end"—just another difficult beginning. Most journeys start with La Bestia—the dangerous trains on whose roofs thousands of migrant children ride. Question 7: "Did anything happen on your trip to the U.S. that scared you or hurt you?" For this question, which went much of the time unanswered, Luiselli describes the rapes and violence that traumatize nearly 80 percent of the children and women from their original point of departure—Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala—en route to the United States. Prior to their journeys, the children fled gang violence, drug use, and trafficking. Throughout, Luiselli connects these children's harrowing journeys and fates to the U.S. military's involvement in Central America in the 1980s, immigration policies a decade later, and America's relationship with Mexico. "Once you're here," Luiselli writes toward the end of the book, "you're ready to give everything, or almost everything, to stay and play a part in the great theater of belonging." ■





## Lost Children Archive

By Valeria Luiselli

**THE STORY:** An unhappy, New York-based, Mexican-born couple, with their young children from prior relationships in tow, embark on a road trip to the Southwest. The father, an audio documentarian relocating to that region, intends to explore the ghosts and “inventory of echoes” of Geronimo and Apache culture; the mother, the narrator, is a radio journalist documenting the immigration crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border. She has also promised a woman she will investigate the whereabouts of her two detained “lost” daughters. The children alternate between listening to their father’s legendary tales of Apache youth, news reports of the border, *Elegies for Lost Children*, and a *Lord of the Flies* audiobook. Then the two children go off alone, reasoning their parents will pay more attention to them more as “lost” children. As the family’s fates become surreally intertwined with immigrant and American Indian children, it spirals into its own crisis.

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Los Angeles Times



**“Luiselli’s novel is the kind of book we need right now: one not afraid to dig into the politics of the present, but always with an eye toward posterity. ... It doesn’t offer answers or illumination necessarily, but it does, like the struck match, make us aware of the dark, unknown space that surrounds it, of the enormous ignorance that envelops everything we think we know.”** TYLER

MALONE

New York Times



**“[B]y visiting the terrors that refugee children routinely face upon these children—our children, as they have come to feel in the novel; children expected to be spared—Luiselli drives home just how much pain and sacrifice we are prepared to accept in the lives of others. She dramatizes what it takes for people to stare hard at their own families, to examine their complicity in other people’s suffering.”** PARUL SEHGAL

NPR



**“Read together with *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli’s third novel is, among other things, a fascinating demonstration of the interplay between fiction and nonfiction—and a window into how a writer can forge two very different books from the same raw material. ... *Lost Children Archive* is more sobering than playful, but what Luiselli has pulled off here is a twist on the great American road trip novel, a book about alienation as well as aliens that chronicles fractures, divides, and estrangement—of both a family and a country.”** HELLER MCALPIN

Harpers



**“What emerges from this braiding and reworking of disparate texts is a highly imaginative and politically deft portrait of childhood within a vast American landscape. ... A rollicking tale that contains within it an extremely disciplined exercise in political empathy—what might it be like, the novel imagines, for children and their parents to be separated, lost in a hostile environment.”** LIDIJA HAAS

Washington Post



**“Lest anyone get upset about artistic license, Luiselli includes a detailed works cited page that sources those quotes, allusions and craft decisions. Does plot matter, when her deep thinking yields vital insights? Her mind is a delight.”** KRISTEN MILLARES YOUNG

Chicago Tribune



**“Luiselli ... argues for our country’s responsibility to care for migrant children whose lives and families were made fragile by ruinous American policies, from the failed war on drugs to destabilizing interventions in the democratic affairs of our southern neighbors.”** KRISTEN MILLARES YOUNG

New Yorker



**“What is missing—the absence is surely intended—is, precisely, the middle: an artifice bold enough to invent and evoke the day-to-day specificities of people whose lives are very different from our own, and whose hardship seems almost unreachable.”** JAMES WOOD

Wall Street Journal



**“The thematic layering of absences and silences, and the real and invented meta-texts sown throughout the narrative, make this a highly conceptual novel. ... But her bookish approach fits uncomfortably with the immigration crisis, turning the subject of missing and separated children into a literary device.”** SAM SACKS

### CRITICAL SUMMARY

*Lost Children Archive*, Luiselli’s first novel written in English, serves as a companion piece to *Tell Me How It Ends*. But this innovative, ambitious work widens her scope to explore the intimacies of marriage, parenthood, equality and inequality, and justice. With her scintillating writing, Luiselli experiments in her use of various texts, American Indian history, literature, and each family member’s “archive boxes” of photos, documents, maps, and more. At times, the fine line she straddles between “traditional realist artifice and convention” can frustrate, with “too much talk about archives, inventories, echoes, ghosts” (*New Yorker*). But, without moralizing, Luiselli succeeds at depicting the pain of—and collusion with—other people’s tragedies. “Like her earlier work,” concludes NPR, “[the novel is] a remarkable feat of empathy and intellectuality that once again showcases Luiselli’s ability to braid the political, historical, and personal while explicitly addressing the challenges of figuring out how to tell the very story she’s telling.” ■